
SHORT NOTES

A Capture Record of the Northern Shrike-tit

The Northern Shrike-tit *Falcunculus frontatus whitei* is one of the least known of Australia's endemic birds, having been reported fewer than 30 times (Robinson & Woinarski 1992), and apparently never captured alive. Its scarcity is perplexing and does not obviously reflect the availability of the tropical woodland habitat it occupies. Garnett (1992: 164) rated the subspecies "Insufficiently Known" and urged that "sight records should be followed up to determine critical aspects of its ecology".

On the morning of 28 November 1996 we inadvertently captured a single Northern Shrike-tit in a mist net in the vicinity of the junction of the Stuart Highway and the Edith Falls Road between Pine Creek and Katherine in the Northern Territory. The capture occurred whilst we were attempting to net Gouldian Finches *Erythrura gouldiae*. Following its release we observed the bird for about ten minutes before it flew out of sight, but it was not observed to feed.

On the basis of criteria described by Rogers *et al.* (1986) for the Eastern Shrike-tit *F. f. frontatus*, the bird we caught was a sub-adult male. It was darker and duller above than illustrated by Simpson & Day (1993) and had brown tail feathers and blue legs, and was much duller below than the photograph in Boles (1988), differences which may be attributable to its age. With a weight of 23.5 g and a head-bill length of 36.6 mm, the bird was much smaller than the Eastern Shrike-tit in Victoria (Rogers *et al.* 1986), consistent with comparisons in general texts (e.g. Simpson & Day 1993). The bird we caught was in the early stages of primary moult, but no other moult was present. Its two central tail feathers were much more worn than the other five pairs.

The bird was captured in a 40 m wide cleared easement through woodland on sandy, granitic soils. The adjacent undisturbed woodland was dominated by Darwin Woollybutt *Eucalyptus miniata* and secondarily by Ironwood *Erythrophleum chlorostachys*, Salmon Gum *Eu. tintinnans* and Round-leaved Bloodwood *Corymbia latifolia*, with a variety of other tree species present in small numbers. This is within the range of habitats described for the subspecies by Robinson & Woinarski (1992).

We think it curious that this sighting was made at a location where the threatened Gouldian Finch, another bird with a notably sparse and patchy distribution in the tropical woodlands, was present. This could, of course,

be a simple artefact; our activities in the area were focussed on Gouldian Finch sites. However, a number of previous reports have also been at known Gouldian Finch sites, e.g. Mt Todd and Timber Creek (Robinson & Woinarski 1992). Furthermore, three recent sightings in the Kimberley region of Western Australia were all in the immediate vicinity of Gouldian Finches (G. Swann, pers. comm.). There is no likelihood of similarity in the foraging ecology of the two species. We are tempted to speculate that subtle commonalities of habitat may draw the two species to the same sites, perhaps in response to fire regimes.

References

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